
Just Schools: The Idea of Racial Equality in American Education by
DAVID L. KIRP. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982; xiii +
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In a republic, a constitution, necessarily stated in general, universal terms, is supposed to protect the substantive and procedural rights of minorities against possible assaults by majorities. Yet local conditions vary, and in a federal system, where different levels of government overlap and interact, different local majorities of citizens, and judges who owe their appointments to local influence, will make varying decisions.

Those decisions often will conflict with the standards of higher-level governments or with universalistic values held by some within the local community. Even if a societal consensus exists on general ideals, moreover, people will differ on how to translate those abstractions into practice.

These dilemmas provide the manifest framework for David Kirp's case studies of the evolution of public school racial policies in five Bay Area school districts—San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley, Richmond, and Sausalito—from the 1950s through the 1970s. A professor of public policy at Boalt School of Law in Berkeley, and author of a 1979 book on school racial policies in Britain, Kirp was a policy consultant to the San Francisco and Berkeley school boards in the 1970s. *Just Schools* is an expanded policy memorandum, and has the quick but frail insights common to its genre. Its virtues are rich specific detail and an acute consciousness of possible connections between specific instances and broader generalizations. But defects balance these strong points. Kirp exhibits a tendency to paper over troubling paradoxes with sonorous but largely empty phrases, a tenuous fit between case studies and general principles, and some ignorance of historical events. Kirp's normative stance might well differ if he did not think (to exaggerate just a bit, perhaps) that the world was created in 1954 (e.g., pp. 12, 13, 32, 39–40, 42, 58, 216, 255, 277, 293).

Kirp's four introductory and two concluding chapters are only loosely connected with his six case study chapters (a short verbal tour of the Bay Area and one chapter for each of the five cities). In the framing portions of the book, he assaults unspecified "naive liberals" who pose the issues of race and schooling in abstract, universalistic terms and assume that a solitary answer is possible (p. 274); who believe judges are "non-political" officials setting down general solutions in accordance with constitutional dictates (p. 289); and who view equality as an eternal goal whose definition does not shift with time and circumstances (p. 278). Kirp's Burkean, as opposed to their Platonic viewpoint is that "a uniform solution" is a "misguided aspiration" (p. 263); that "substantive change is beyond [the national government's] grasp" and that the federal government can only "induce the appearance of compliance" (p. 294); that courts are more often useful in such controversies not as "shaper[s] of doctrine," but as openly "political" referees, herding the competing parties toward a decision while imposing only "minimum

standards" of racial fairness (pp. 271, 283, 295); and that equality means only "what those affected concur that it means" (p. 291).

While the simple court-ordered, color-blind nostrum of desegregation was a suitable remedy for the statutory segregation of the South in the 1950s, Kirp believes that integration, which goes beyond merely placing minority and majority children in the same building, raises more complex problems. These problems inevitably require trade-offs between different goals, trade-offs which people can only make efficiently in each local area (pp. 22, 107). Whatever one's judgments of this value-suffused argument, and I think some of it is perceptive but much of it is, at best, question-begging, how it was "derived from the detailed recounting of the Bay Area communities' experience" (p. 283) is not apparent, even if one grants the implicit assumption that one can deduce or induce statements of values from statements of fact.

In the 1960s and 1970s, court rulings affected only San Francisco and Richmond, of the five communities, and in both, initial decisions that favored blacks were overturned after lengthy appeals. Neither court nor federal executive agency action, according to Kirp, had an important effect on the process of desegregation in the region (p. 270). In three of the cities, many of its proponents (especially blacks) abandoned integration almost with its first signs of fulfillment. In Berkeley, "alternative school" experiments and minority separatism replaced it; in Sausalito, it was Black Panther theatrics; while Oakland realized that, as black enrollment had grown from 40 percent of the total in 1962 to 75 percent by 1971, blacks could control, but not integrate, the schools. In Richmond and San Francisco, the backlash movements of opportunistic politicians, as well as the concerns of San Francisco's new multi-ethnic immigrants, foredoomed planned integration. California's budget-cutting ballot Proposition No. 13 forced all school districts to subordinate social, as well as many more narrow, goals to the struggle for institutional existence. By 1980, black student achievement scores were still far below those of whites throughout the area, and black children remained in racially isolated schools everywhere except in Berkeley and Sausalito, the homes of those universalistic liberals. The meaning of equality may change from place to place and time to time, but inequality always looks pretty much the same.

David L. Kirp is often insightful or at least provocative, and his book contains much information which is new to those outside of Northern

California. Although he is hard on liberals and rational or national solutions, but not equally critical of conservatives or of local temporizing and extemporizing, for blacks and Latinos, Kirp's "plausible policy direction for the 1980's" (p. 283) is, in effect, to bargain locally for whatever they can get. Except for brief periods in which they had some outside allies, that is what minority group members have been doing in America since 1865.

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